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# RADICAL FREEDOM, RADICAL EVIL AND THE POSSIBILITY OF ETERNAL DAMNATION

Mark Stephen Pestana

Thomas Talbott has recently argued that eternal damnation is incompatible with the notion of a loving God. Part of his argument involves rejecting the notion of self-willed damnation as being incoherent. In my paper I critique this part of his argument by attempting to provide a ground in action theory for the idea of willful separation from God. I elucidate this ground in terms of Duns Scotus' characterization of free agency and a distinction in the intentional ordering of volition. I briefly elaborate the structure of moral evil in terms of these notions. And finally I argue, using these concepts, that the idea of eternal self-willed damnation is not incoherent, even if we consider those blessed with the vision of God.

## I.

In his excellent article on the doctrine of everlasting punishment, Thomas Talbott argues that the doctrine of hell is incompatible with the doctrine of a loving God.<sup>1</sup> His argument employs three conceptions of the nature of damnation, which he labels as "conservative," "hard-hearted" and "moderately conservative" theism. The conservative position is that damnation consists in the eternal rejection by God of sinners. The moderately conservative conception is that damnation is the eternal rejection by sinners of God. And the hard-hearted view is that damnation is the fate of the non-elect (those created persons who are simply not loved by God). He consecutively argues that each of these conceptions ultimately involves a contradiction with the doctrine of God as a loving being. I believe that his arguments work in the case of the conservative and the hard-hearted conceptions of damnation. Therefore, I focus my response on his arguments, which I find less compelling, against the moderately conservative position.

According to Talbott, the problem involved in the moderately conservative conception of damnation stems from the idea that,

Some persons will, despite God's best efforts to save them, finally reject God and separate themselves from God forever.<sup>2</sup>

The difficulty which he claims arises from this notion is that of conceiving of a possible motive for such a rejection of God. In an analysis that echoes



John Hick's discussion of the same topic, Talbott points out that since the choice to separate oneself from God must be free, it must be free from ignorance of God, from deception about the consequences of the choice and from bondage to sinful desires.<sup>3</sup> He then claims that because there is no conceivable motive for such a choice, the idea that someone freely chooses eternal damnation is deeply incoherent and cannot be admitted as possibly occurring.<sup>4</sup>

I find this argument less compelling than his case against the other two conceptions because Talbott glosses over the conception of free agency which grounds the possibility claimed in the moderately conservative position. In this paper, I intend to defend the moderately conservative conception of damnation by grounding it in Scotistic radical free agency.

In section II, I explicate Scotus' conception of free agency and introduce a distinction between "first intention" volitions and "second intention" volitions. In section III, I apply Scotus' theory to the problem of moral evil and attempt a construal of radically evil choice as involving the suspension of first intention willing. In the final section I conclude that the idea of eternal damnation is entirely coherent if radically evil choice is construed as having as its second intention object the supremacy of one's own capacity for refraining from first intention volitions.

## II.

Any notion of wickedness is logically dependent upon a theory of human freedom and its limitations. To put the point roughly, the "more free" humans are conceived of as being, the greater is the degree of their conceivable evil doing. Duns Scotus championed a theory of action according to which rational agents are capable of three species of free volition. The third will prove crucial to the ultimate explication of evil and is best elucidated in contrast to the other two.<sup>5</sup>

The first way in which our will is freely exercised is easily understood if we restrict consideration to purely mental acts, e.g., imagining or remembering. With regard to any mental content, however atomistically or inclusively described, an individual can either attend to that content or not attend to that content. To take a simple example, I am quite free to focus my attention on the memory image of my father or not focus my attention on that image. If I choose not to attend to such an object then some other intentional object will "present" itself to my mind's eye for consideration. "Wherever" that next object comes from, e.g., sensory stimulation or the workings of imagination, it is again within my power to attend or not to attend to that object. In scholastic terminology this is referred to as "freedom of specification," the content of my consciousness being specified from among a field of possibilities by my exercise of choice.<sup>6</sup>

The second species of free willing can be best approached through a scholastic axiom. Since everything in the universe, though good since created by God, suffers some degree of imperfection (since not identical to God), it follows that every possible object of consciousness, other than God, possesses good qualities and lacks other good qualities. Therefore any intentional object can be attended to insofar as it is good or insofar as it is not good (i.e., lacking in some good). And an individual is free in precisely this sense; he can choose to attend to an object under either aspect. This is known as freedom of contrariety, since either aspect can be attended to or neither aspect attended to (i.e., when some other object altogether is attended to).<sup>7</sup> Coupled with freedom of specification, the free exercise of the will amounts to the capacity to attend or not to attend to the good or not-good properties of whatever comes to one's attention.

For Scotus, if we have attended to an object as good then a tendency toward further acts of will which realize or unite us with that object is elicited. If the object is attended to insofar as it is not good then a tendency toward further acts of will, which negate the object or separate us from it, is elicited. It is of the nature of the will that if the object is attended to as good (or as not good) then a disposition to exercise the will in a certain manner follows, though we remain free to attend to the object under its other aspect or not to attend to it at all (in which cases a different disposition would be elicited.).<sup>8</sup>

Scotus refers to this elicitation as "*velle naturaliter*." It is our natural inclination to attain what is apprehended as good or shun what is apprehended as lacking in good. The crucial term here is 'inclination' for this is only a disposition to so will and is not willing activity proper. According to his analysis, the will is not forced to elicit any act in line with its disposition to activity.<sup>9</sup> Active willing proper, Scotus refers to as "*potentia libera*" which is the third species of free volition. It is the free operation whereby the disposition to will in a certain way (e.g., realizing a good) actually issues into activity. In short, an individual may either freely realize what one is prompted to realize ("*velle*") or freely abstain from realizing what one is prompted to realize ("*non velle-non nolle*"). So too, an individual may freely either negate what one is prompted to negate ("*nolle*") or abstain from negating what one is prompted to negate ("*non velle-non nolle*"). As Scotus says,

In regard to any object, then, the will is able not to will or will it, and can suspend itself from eliciting any act in particular with regard to this or that. And this is something anyone can experience in himself when someone proffers some good. Even if it is presented as something to be considered and willed, one can turn away from it and not elicit any act in its regard....<sup>10</sup>

This capacity is referred to, in scholastic terminology, as "freedom of exercise" or "freedom of contradiction."<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that if the will is exercised in this way, the proffered good remains before the mind's eye and as a consequence the disposition to realize in further acts of will the

proffered good remains elicited (or "activated"). It is not the case that the suspension from realizing a good thing occurs simply because the individual has attended to the contrary evaluative aspect of the thing or has attended to some entirely different object. Scotus further elaborates how this refraining from willing, when the object remains before consciousness, is to be understood.

He conceives that the individual's attention shifts slightly or expands to include her own act of will with regard to the object. In effect, though the object is attended to as good, the individual concomitantly attends to her own active willing (of that good) as not good. Accordingly, she suspends the elicitation of any act of will with regard to that thing (and in spite of a disposition to will the thing). To quote Scotus again, the will

could voluntarily not will that object and still have another volition, viz. one that reflects on its own act, for instance, "I will not elicit an act as regards that object."<sup>12</sup>

I will call acts of will which have as their object, further acts of will, "second intention" volitions and acts of will which have as their objects, real as opposed to intentional objects, "first intention" volitions. Examples of second intention acts of will might include resolving to act in a certain way in the future or deciding now to form an intention at a later date.<sup>13</sup>

Now, according to Scotus' theory of action, it is conceptually necessary that if a thing is attended to under its good characteristics *and* further first intention will activity freely ensues then it is activity which is directed toward the realization of the object. It would be conceptually impossible for volitional activity to ensue which is aimed at negating an object attended to as good. Also, it is necessary that if will activity ensues when attending to a thing as evil then it is activity aimed at separating oneself from or destroying that object. Again it would be impossible to realize an object attended to under the aspect of evil.<sup>14</sup> In any case, it is possible by freedom of exercise that no first intention acts of will (further than attending to the object under an evaluative aspect) occur at all.

To sum up, we can regard Scotus' concept of the free exercise of the will as a genus with three species. An individual first, is free to attend or not to attend to any object of consciousness, second, is free to attend to an object under its good aspect or under its not-good aspect and third, is free with regard to the volitional disposition elicited by such a conception. If one has attended to an object as good, one may choose to attend to that object no longer, and it will vanish from awareness. If an object is attended to as good (or lacking some good), but the will activity which is prompted by the evaluation is suspended, then one is to be regarded as exercising a second intention volition which has as its object the good of such suspension from willing. The following example may help to clarify Scotus' notions.

I know that the Dean has stolen money from department funds. When appearing before the investigating board, I am asked if the Dean is the culprit. In my awareness, I attend to the beneficial aspects of telling the truth (i.e., I consider only the good qualities of answering 'yes, the Dean stole the money') and am consequently disposed so to speak. Now, by Scotus' notion of freedom of exercise, I have the option of saying nothing. In so refraining, my attention shifts to include my own act of will with regard to the good of telling the truth and I judge (perhaps) that it is good for me not to will in accord with the inclination so to speak. Accordingly, I remain silent. If I do speak then I will tell the truth since that is the good to which I attend. I could, by freedom of specification, cease to attend to the good of telling the truth and attend to something else altogether, in which case I might not speak or might not speak the truth. However, in this case the object before my mind has altered, i.e., I am no longer attending to the good of telling the truth. Scotus' theory allows for inaction in the light of a clearly conceived good, after which inaction the clearly conceived good remains before the mind eliciting a disposition to actively will its realization. I will now attempt to explicate moral evil in terms of Scotus' analysis of freedom and the distinction between first and second intention volitions.

### III.

An individual who chooses wrongly is typically conceived of as doing something forbidden in order to achieve some apparent good. Scotus' theory of action allows immoral acts to be conceptualized in precisely this way. When someone chooses wrongly, one of two possible conditions obtains. Either an individual's disposition to realize an apparent good freely issues into actual activity even though she knows, in some sense, the object to be evil. Or an individual's disposition to shun an apparent evil freely issues into actual activity even though she knows, again in some sense, the object to be good. In terms of the previous distinction between orders of volition, such wrong choices are first intention willings. Scotus' theory of action also allows for the conceptualization of second intention immoral acts. At this intentional level, again, one of two possible conditions obtains. In the first case, an individual conceives as good the free issuance into activity of her first intention volitive disposition (to realize a known good), which conception elicits, in its turn, a disposition toward realization (second intention). The individual chooses wrongly if her second intention disposition freely issues into will activity proper. In this instance, the known first intention good is realized, but only as a means to achieve another only apparent good (the object of the second intention conception). In the second case, an individual conceives as good the *nonissuance* into activity of her first intention volitive disposition (to realize a known good) which conception elicits, in its turn, a disposition

toward realization (second intention). The individual chooses wrongly if her second intention disposition freely issues into will activity proper, which in this case means that her first intention disposition is suspended.

Now, the extreme example of this last type of evil willing would be the fall of the blessed from beatitude. Though Scotus admits to the utterly speculative character of his suggestions, he does intimate that even if the object before the mind is God, it is still possible for a radically free will not to affirm this perfect good, i.e., not to "cleave" to God.<sup>15</sup> Within his conception there always remains the possibility of inertia, apathy, indifference. A possible second intention apparent good, realized in this radically evil inertia, is indicated by Descartes, in a remark he made on the nature of the will,

...it is always open to us to hold back from pursuing a clearly known good, or from admitting a clearly perceived truth, provided we consider it a good thing to demonstrate the freedom of our will by so doing.<sup>16</sup>

Taking Descartes' suggestion then, I withhold in order to prove myself capable of so refusing! Note that in such an exercise of will, the object before my mind is not merely the first intention object which elicits a tendency toward activity. It has been appended by awareness of my own volitive tendencies toward God. The supremely evil choice can then be conceived of as demurring the realization of the greatest known good (first intention) in order to realize the apparent good of proving to myself that I am capable of so demurring (second intention). Now, in the light of this, let us look at Talbott's claim that eternal damnation is an incoherent notion.

#### IV.

Talbott dismisses the idea that one would choose eternal misery for oneself on the grounds that there could be no possible motive for such a choice (assuming one is not subject to ignorance, deception and bondage).<sup>17</sup> He is right that there is no first intention good so realized, but it does not follow that the notion is incoherent for it may be construed as the realization of a second intention good. I behold God directly, which vision elicits a disposition to cleave to God. Yet, I do not so cleave (first intention suspension) in order to realize the apparent (second intention) good of proving I am capable of so abstaining.

If in a direct vision of God, I demur on this greatest of all possible goods then what could God possibly do to save me? If he restricts my freedom to prevent me from so demurring then he has in effect annihilated me as a being capable of second intention volitions. If a being is free to choose God then it is free not to choose God, even in the "face to face."<sup>18</sup> That "not choosing" is a separation and a damnation and if I demur on the splendor of God in eternity then I damn myself in eternity.<sup>19</sup>

## NOTES

1. Thomas Talbott, "The Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment," *Faith and Philosophy*, January, 1990, pp. 19-42.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

3. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), pp. 277-80; Talbott, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

4. Talbott, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-38.

5. This exposition is based on the analyses in Bernadine M. Bonansea, "Duns Scotus' Voluntarism" in J. K. Ryan and B. M. Bonansea, *Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy. Volume Three: John Duns Scotus 1265-1965* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1965), pp. 83-121; J. R. Cresswell, "Duns Scotus on the Will," *Franciscan Studies*, June-September, 1953, pp. 147-58; R. Effler, *John Duns Scotus and the Principle 'Omne quod movetur ab alio movetur'* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1962), pp. 156-66; and C. R. S. Harris, *Duns Scotus*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), pp. 281-300.

6. Bonansea, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Vide Allan B. Wolter, *The Philosophical Theology of John Duns Scotus*, edited by Marilyn McCord Adams (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 139-44.

9. John Duns Scotus, *God and Creatures: The Quodlibetal Questions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), Question Six, pp. 181-82.

10. Duns Scotus, *On the Will and Morality* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1986), p. 195. Cf. John Duns Scotus, *God and Creatures: The Quodlibetal Questions*, Question 16, pp. 369-87. Also cf. Virgil to Dante on Mount Purgatory:

Wherefore, suppose that every Love which is kindled in you arises of necessity, the power to arrest it is in you. This noble virtue Beatrice understands as the free will...

Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio Canto XVIII L. 70-74*, trans. Singleton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 193.

11. Bonansea, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

12. John Duns Scotus, *God and Creatures: The Quodlibetal Questions*, p. 373.

13. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 17, a. 5; Alan Donagan, "Saint Thomas on the Analysis of Human Action" in Norman Kurtzmann *et al.*, *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 642-54, esp. pp. 650-51; and Alan Donagan, *Choice: The Essential Element in Human Action* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), Chapter Nine.

14. Duns Scotus, *On the Will and Morality*, p. 193.

15. Duns Scotus, *God and Creatures*, p. 376 and *On the Will and Morality*, pp. 464-77. Vide also Bonansea, *op. cit.*, pp. 89, 90, and 120. Cf. Martin Buber, concerning the Fall of Lucifer, to whom God was fully revealed,



...and if there were a devil he would not be the one who decided against God but he that in all eternity did not decide.

Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Scribners, 1970), p. 101.

16. Quoted in Anthony Kenny, "Descartes on the Will" in his collection *The Anatomy of the Soul: Historical Essays in the Philosophy of Mind* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 105.

17. Talbott, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

18. This is Eleonore Stump's argument in her "Dante's Hell, Aquinas's Moral Theory and the Love of God," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, June 1986, pp. 181-98, esp. pp. 194-95, and in her "The Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy*, October 1985, pp. 392-423, esp. p. 406.

19. I am grateful to Philip L. Quinn, Thomas Talbott, Dewey Hoytenga and a referee for this journal for extensive criticisms of an earlier draft of this paper.